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# Exploring the Literacy Lives of Elementary Male Readers

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**Exploring the Literacy Lives of Elementary Male Readers**

Kelly N. Muszak

The College at Brockport

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Literacy Education B-12.

May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the literacy habits and reading preferences of a small group of successful first grade male readers. Stereotypes embedded in current literacy research tend to categorize male readers as low performing or unmotivated. There is limited research that focuses on young male readers with a positive outlook on reading. The intent of this research project is provide a lens into the literacy lives of these successful readers, transferring their preferences and attitudes into conclusions to help all male readers succeed. This research examines the reading preferences and attitudes of young male readers through surveys, interviews and observations.

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## Introduction

As a substitute teacher, I am consistent with the inconsistent - every classroom encounter is filled with newness. On a daily basis I see daily a myriad of faces, voice pitches and lunch boxes of every design. Book bags are filled with different titles such as *Pete the Cat*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, even *Captain Underpants*. Yet, a consistent message within the realm of educational research regarding male students is very dismal; boys struggle with reading achievement and motivation (Senn, 2012; Brozo, 2012; Merisuo-Storm, 2006). “He’s a boy, he’d rather be outside playing sports than reading a book” is a phrase not strange to hear in schools. One disheartening study shows that boys not only take longer to read than girls, they also are more likely to identify as nonreaders (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Yet, what about the students that rely on books for challenge, enjoyment and interactive adventure? What happens when we explore the literacy lives of boys who are successful readers?

I have never been in an elementary classroom where a whole gender of students is disengaged with literacy. On the contrary, I have witnessed many of these readers show high enthusiasm for the book fair, book orders, and even weekly visits to exchange a library book. Witnessing boys reading and discussing trading cards, video game manuals, chapter books with pictures such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, I notice how literacy can take many different forms. If we listen to this pool of elementary male readers about their perceptions and preferences, imagine the possibilities to improve their literacy instruction.

## Problem Statement

When it comes to elementary males who show success in literacy, the research is very minimal. Multiple sources of reading assessment data can depict boys as a whole group achieving significantly less than female students in reading and writing (OECD, 2009; Klecker,

2006; Serafini, 2014). “Eventually, when they get to high school, boys will do better in math and sciences...so why worry?” can be generally heard to pacify the stereotype, which is very disconcerting for teachers (Bausch, 2007 p. 199). One research source notes that seventy percent of the students enrolled in reading intervention services are male (Sullivan, 2014).

Even though it is important to focus on male readers who are struggling, researchers should not overlook those who are successful readers. There are many boys in schools who defy negative data, embracing the challenge and rigor of reading. They read in school and independently read to become an expert on a topic, or wait patiently for the last installment of a worthwhile book series. Teachers should be aware of the needs of not only the struggling readers, but also the active readers who show success.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of my study is to observe the literacy lives of two first grade students who are not only reading at grade level, but showing enthusiasm towards reading. As a teacher, it has always been my mission to help make literacy meaningful and compelling for students, which helps them improve their reading achievement. I wanted to observe the strengths and interests of these elite first grade readers to not only to help continue their path of success, but help reluctant male readers develop a literacy life of their own.

Not only will this study help me engage struggling and proficient male readers, it could also inform educational staff of ways to assist struggling male readers. Reading specialists, parents and educational leaders can use the findings from this study plan engaging literacy instruction for male students. Focusing on boys with reading prowess could also provide a platform of strategies and approaches to help students who may be on the cusp of entering the negative data of failing male readers.



**Significance**

This research is significant because I am passionate about helping students develop their reading interests. I believe literacy opens so many doors for a student's future, and it saddens me when I see some male students relay that reading is a girl subject. I believe that helping struggling readers starts with examining the readers that are succeeding in reading, transferring those strategies and ideas to promote growth. Researching this topic can improve my ability to teach and adapt instruction to all levels of elementary male readers. This study is also significant because there is inadequate research surrounding the collection of motivated male literacy learners, a group whose instruction matters and deserves a voice. If teachers examine the literacy lives of boys who identify as readers, schools could move forward in engaging young male readers that are reluctant to read and write.

**Research Questions**

The following questions are presented throughout this study:

1. What do these elementary male readers enjoy reading?
2. How do they perceive "good" readers?
3. How do these readers approach reading challenges?

**Literature Review**

Since there is limited research about male students who lead active literacy lives, we must view the dominant literature that shows negativity, stereotypes and other obstacles surrounding this group. Research highlights the lack of reading achievement in male students, comparing their scores to the higher scoring female students (Brozo, 2010; Whitmire, 2012; Senn, 2012; Boltz, 2007). In contrast, reviewing literature concerning the habits of successful

readers could help me understand possibly why these specific students are succeeding. Since I wanted to see what these students enjoyed reading, I chose to research certain genres that are found to be popular for boys in school. I also wanted to research factors that promoted male readers to develop a positive attitude toward literacy.

### **Deficit Driven Paradigm**

When diving into research of elementary males and literacy, the amount of research solely shedding light on the deficit and struggle of male readers is overwhelming, making little reference to triumphs for male readers. There is data to support the gender gap in reading achievement on a national and international level. According to the reading assessment data provided by the National Assessment of Educational (NAEP) progress, there is an evident inconsistency between female and male reading scores. According to the chart on page 16, female student's scores have been five or more points higher than male scores since 1992 (NAEP, 2011; Klecker, 2006). Examining 2006 NAEP 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading comprehension scores, it was evident that each grade level showed discrepancies between male and female reading achievement (Klecker, 2006). The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a program that gives a reading test to assess approximately 470,000 students in over 60 countries, supported the notion of a gap between male and female student reading achievement (Brozo, Sulkunen, Shiel, Garbe, Pandian, Valtin, 2014). Representatives of PISA note that not only is there a gender gap in achievement, but also males have lower reading engagement and are less likely to read recreationally (OECD, 2010).

**Missing Masculinity.** There is a disconcerting notion in schools that reading is not perceived as a masculine activity, but rather a practice more enjoyed by female students. “If a young boy adopts this view, reading conflicts with his sense of boyhood and he has little value for it, invests little effort in it and....gains less experience and falls farther and farther behind” (Zambo, 2007). This stereotype is weaved throughout research. “If reading is perceived as feminine, boys will go to great lengths to avoid it” (Boltz, 2007).

One study observing successful adolescent male readers noticed that stereotypes do not impact all male readers. Skeleton and Francis (2011) used the term “Renaissance Masculinity” for successful male readers, meaning the definition of masculinity can be inclusive to being multitalented and rational rather than narrow minded (p. 20). Masculinity could very well connect to reading interests and preferences. Yet, deeming some books “boy” books and others “girl” books could create hesitation toward literacy.

### **What is Genre?**

Genre is defined as literature that is “grouped together” according to theme or topic (Earnshaw, 2014). The most common genres fall under the broad categories of fiction and nonfiction text. The Common Core English Language Arts standards are diverse with genre, yet have a forward push of using informational text with students. According to the Common Core English/Language Arts learning standards, “...students should be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas.” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

**Nonfiction.** Nonfiction is a genre that promotes boys to read for a purpose. Whether it is to read to help become an “expert” on a topic or to learn a new skill, reading to learn something applicable to life can be worthwhile for this group of students (Senn, 2012). One study examining reading interests from a middle school boys’ book club demonstrated that they feel reading informational text is not only meant to be engaging, but also “...educational—a way to learn about new things, real people, and places” (Weih, 2008 p. 21). Nonfiction text comes in many forms, from magazines to chapter books that can engage a reader’s personal interests.

**Humor.** Silly graphics, along with plots that cause laughter and connections can compel more male students to become active readers. Comedy is a popular yet controversial genre in the realm of male literacy. Jon Scieszka, a popular children's author, explains that popular stories such as *Captain Underpants*, the *Stinky Cheese Man*, *Super Diaper Baby* and other crazy titles may not be promoted as choices in the classroom because of unscholarly graphics and plot (Whitmire, 2010). Yet, these texts draw boys into libraries; students are returning these books as fast as taking them out. One qualitative study of pre-adolescent boys found that frequently boys chose texts not only with a lot of visual components, but plots that were humorous (Blair, Sandford, 2004). Frank Serafini (2013), literacy professor of Arizona State and published author of multiple articles surrounding male literacy, explains that we should not ban books but help boys start to enjoy independent reading. He argues, “Teachers and parents have to let go of some of their biases about books that contain underwear, farting and slapstick misbehavior and allow books they find engaging” (Serafini, 2013).

**Graphic Novels.** Graphic novels, books with comic-book qualities and visuals, are an upcoming genre to engage male readers (Whitmire, 2010). In one research case that introduced graphic novels like *Tin Tin* in a library, a male student reflected that graphic novels are better because of seeing what is happening rather than using imagination (Bunn, 2012 ). A similar study suggests that graphic novels support student engagement because they merge visual elements with plot (Laycock, 2007).

Certain educators may argue that graphic novels aren't complicated enough to promote critical thinking and strengthen comprehension. However, it can be argued that they are as "...multimodal texts require readers to use a variety of interpretive strategies to follow along" (Laycock, 2007). An English teacher, Laycock (2007) interviewed 46 boys after their teachers used a graphic novel in literacy instruction. The study found that the use of this genre highly increased the standard of student engagement, improving both participation and class discussion (Laycock, 2007).

### **The Habits of Successful Readers**

**Effective Strategies.** Since this study showcases first graders who are reading at grade level, we need to understand the lens of strong readers. One classroom research study showed after a reflective questionnaire of a fourth grade class, a majority of the students wrote that "good readers" sound out, ask questions and read to understand (Johnson, 2005). The results of this study also displayed students' perceptions of a "good reader" changed as the school year progressed. When the students were required to take the test four months later, the list of qualities of a "good reader" went from 47 to 72 (Johnson, 2005). "Teaching students to read like proficient readers can work only if students have an accurate understanding of what good readers use" (Johnson, 2005). When students understand their

power in using strategies, reading independence can be achieved. Students also can adopt strategies themselves if they can reflect on the process a good reader uses.

It is proven in literacy instruction that skilled readers use a balance of cognitive and metacognitive strategies when approaching difficult text (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009). Cognitive strategies involve being interactive with text, whether it is underlining, summarizing, summoning background knowledge and visualization (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009). Meta-cognitive strategies include problem solving, reflecting on predictions, remembering key details and recalling story sequence (Anastasiou & Griva 2009). Using these strategies in tandem could not only help students stand up to difficult passage but self-coach to find meaning. In one study, 18 struggling readers and 18 strong readers were observed to show strategies they used. The results on the study show that strong readers employ the strategies of meaning-oriented reading, which is striving for the main idea and purpose for reading (Anastasiou & Griva 2009).

**Growth Mindset.** Whether it is positive or negative, a child's attitude to learn can greatly influence their reading ability. This can relate to the research surrounding growth mindset, a state of mind that embraces challenges as a process of learning (Dweck, 2006). However, if a child has a fixed mindset, he do not believe in effort but that ability is genetic, seeing challenge as uncomfortable and will slink away from pressure (Dweck, 2006). In a study from Carol Dweck, two groups of students were given a difficult puzzle. The group of students that received feedback reflecting how hard they worked was able to complete more difficult puzzles than the group that was complimented on being so "smart" (Dweck, 2006). In a different study involving growth mindset, college students who failed a test had the opportunity to look at other students' tests. Students who had a fixed mindset reviewed lower scoring tests while students with a fixed mindset studied the high scoring tests to improve their scores for the retake

(Dweck, 2006). This implies that students with a fixed mindset are looking to improve their self-esteem instead of looking at success to create self-improvement

Students who see learning as a process that requires failure and effort rather than being “a natural” at something are more likely to show grit when expectations are raised (Dweck, 2006). When being faced with a difficult question or tricky word in a paragraph, a student with growth mindset might say, “This may be hard at first but the more I read, the better I will become” rather than discarding the book for an easy choice.

**Interest-Based Text.** Engaged readers can be caught browsing books that spark their interest inside and outside of the school environment. Research shows that when students have power to choose their own reading materials, their reading engagement is positively affected (Henry, Lagos&, Bernt 2012; Senn 2012; Laycock 2012, Merisuo - Storm, 2006). In a study exploring the reading attitudes of 145 elementary students, the results showed when students have the opportunity to choose books based on their interests, it positively impacts their reading engagement (Merisuo - Storm, 2006). Communicating with boys about their outside of school interests could provide the kindling that could spark a positive relationship with reading (Brozo, 2010). According to a study of male readers within the text *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, male students need to exercise control in their book choices and freedom to pick a topic catering to a personal interest (Smith & Wilhelm 2015). “I don't like it if I have to read [a book], but if I read it on my own it would probably be better. ” explains a student showcased in an adolescent research study about male reading motivation (Smith & Wilhelm 2015, p.14).

**Social Reading Activities.** Another positive strategy to impact literacy is making classroom reading a social event. Every male student must feel like he is a part of the reading club. Blair and Sanford (2004) observed that male students showed a positive response when literacy was linked to social interaction and purpose (p.455). “These literacy behaviors appeared very team like...” the teachers reflected when observing boys making connections and applying background knowledge to literature (Blair, Sanford 2004). Similarly, Serafini (2013) observed his students in literacy groups and noticed male readers were more empowered when given freedom to discuss complex text (p. 3).

Another study featuring the reflections and opinions of boys participating in a book club found reading in a social group created reading enjoyment (Wuih, 2008). “The boys thought that a book club should be a friendly place to talk about books with other boys. It should be about going to a place to talk about books with other boys. It should be about having fun and reading”, a student reflects (Wuih, 2008, p.20). Creating an atmosphere of interaction and connection about text can positively influence male students to enjoy reading.

**Relatable Characters.** The ability to connect to a character of a story, or male archetype can be an impactful agent of motivation (Senn, 2012). Positive male archetypes can help “bring boys into the literacy club, and ultimately bestow hope in academic possibilities and life options (Brozo, 2010). When boys read about a character they can connect to, attitude toward books could improve dramatically. Engaged with a single author or saga can be a powerful incentive to develop consistent reading habits, even incentive to finish an entire series of reading. “The boys are reassured by the familiarity of the character, and can share their favorite characters' experience that sometimes span years” (Senn, 2012). Archetypes can also connect to engaging



themes such as leadership, bravery and other attributes that not only sparks interests, but creates awareness of positive character.

**Adult Male Readers.** “My father only read at home when he had an accident and couldn't do anything else” a boy in Freedmon’s (2004) male literacy study reflected (p.12). Giving male students the opportunity to see male role models lead active literacy lives can be very powerful. Some research suggests that schools’ lack of male teachers and mentors contributes to male students not choosing to be active readers inside and outside of the school setting (Henry, Lagos & Berndt 2012; Freedmon, 2004). A similar quantitative and qualitative study of fathers’ involvement in literacy shows that fathers are less likely to encourage literacy practices at home, which impacts an active literacy life (Morgan, 2009). Research also shows that fathers play a less active role compared to mothers in promoting home literacy (Morgan, 2012). Freedmon (2003) found that having men from the community or classroom families be guest readers was positive and meaningful (p. 9).

**Technology and Digital Literacy.** Another method to positively influence male readers in the classroom is to merge technology, media such as video games and visual arts within literacy curriculum. “Cutting literacy learning off from students' media makes school an alien and unappealing place” (Newkirk, 2006). If students are allowed to read and write about movie/TV based plots or are given the opportunity to recreate a story using video or a blog, students can bridge their interest of the technological arts into the world of literacy (Newkirk, 2006). Utilizing a computer for reading and writing could also propel male readers to a find interest in the reading and writing curriculum (Pagini ,2010).

## Methods

### Participants

Participants in this study were chosen because they are currently meeting the first grade standard of reading. Not only do these participants read at grade level, they have high participation grades for language arts and writing. These students frequently return their weekly reading log, which requires students to read 5 times a week for ten minutes. After holding Parent Teacher Conferences with both of these students' parents, it was evident that their families are very supportive of encouraging an active literacy life and at home reading.

**Landon.** Landon (pseudonym) is a 7 year old male student who enjoys reading. First graders are required to read at *Fountas and Pinnel* level J by the end of the year, and Landon currently reads at level L. Landon enjoys reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid series*, books by Mo Willems, and *Timmy Failure books*. Although he has a teacher for one of his parents, both parents encourage Landon to read.

**Brett.** Brett (pseudonym) is a 6 year old male student who completes his reading log on a weekly basis. He is reading at a level K, putting him at grade level standard early in the year. Brett shows enthusiasm toward reading by always volunteering to read aloud and make connections to stories within the unit. He mentioned he reads to his baby sister at home, along with both his parents.

### Setting

The study took place at a school outside of Rochester in a suburban setting. Bay View Elementary has 82.7% Caucasian students, and almost a 1:1 ratio of males to females. The average class size is twenty students, with a total of 42 teachers in the whole school. First

grade is the largest enrollment in the entire building, having four first grade teachers with active classes.

Brett and Landon belong to a class of 18 students. One third of these students receive English as a Second Language (ESL) services. The classroom has 11 boys and 9 girls. The district's literacy block is 120 minutes every day. With the McGraw Hill *Wonders* Program, first grade classrooms have 30 minutes of whole group language arts/phonics instruction in the morning and 90 minutes where teachers pull differentiated groups for Guided Reading. While groups of Guided Reading are being held, students work on centers that connect to the weekly theme and isolated phonics skill of the week. There is also a writing block for 30 minutes at the end of the day where students draft, conference and write up final copies based on editing.

### **Positionality**

I am a long term substitute teacher in a suburban school outside of Rochester, so my role in the study is both a researcher and teacher. I have been working consistently with the same class for the past three months. For my student teaching, I taught in Niagara Falls city school district. I usually work with grades K-5, giving me access to young adult fiction and nonfiction. Currently pursuing my Master's degree in Literacy at the College at Brockport, I am passionate about helping reluctant readers find genres and mediums of text they enjoy. I firmly believe it is my job to help my students develop a strong literacy life and to encourage reading a consistent habit.

Growing up, I have had a positive relationship with reading and writing. My parents read with me at home and frequently took me to the library. This positive attitude toward reading has continued throughout my schooling and higher education.

**Data Collection**

The data were collected and analyzed in a qualitative manor, allowing me to take in account daily classroom events and the literacy classroom community to make connections to my research questions. Qualitative research means, "...a type of research in which the researcher studies a problem that calls for an exploration of a phenomenon; relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general question..." which allowed me to gather diverse data during the school day (Clark & Creswell, 2010 ).

**Surveys**

Using surveys helped me gather insight into the literacy interests and preferences for these student participants. To gather a holistic view of reading attitudes, I administered the Reading Attitude Survey to the group of elementary male readers. (McKenna, Kear 2005). This survey shows how students feel about different purposes for text, and if school literacy makes them happy, disengaged or even angry (McKenna, Kear 2005). Furthermore, this survey is a strong tool for data collection because it is developmentally appropriate for the first grade age. Students have to circle the correct Garfield cat picture that connects to their personal response, which makes answering easier and more visual (Appendix B).

**Interview Questions**

Another tool to collect qualitative data is interview questions (Appendix A). These interview questions were inspired by the Burke Reading Survey, containing questions that divulge a student's reading preferences (Burke, 2005). Realizing the students are at a developmental place where writing responses may be difficult, students were encouraged to draw pictures to display emotions and opinions about reading. During the interviews, I allowed time for additional questions or comments related to the interview questions. These

questions were digitally recorded and transcribed to capture the exact response from each child.

### **Anecdotal Notes**

Anecdotal notes were taken once a week over a period of six weeks. Taken during whole group literacy instruction, centers and guided reading, these notes show the interaction with school literacy and texts. Student connections, opinions and reflections during literacy blocks were collected as work samples or recorded in a notebook. I have also made anecdotal notes of book choices Brett and Landon made during independent reading for each session (Table 2). This helped me find connections and understand students' reading interests.

### **Procedures**

This study took place once a week during guided reading and centers at the students' literacy block for half an hour over a period of 5 weeks. Since part of this study was observational, I spent time simply taking notes and writing observations about how students were interacting with books, discussion and reading activities. I also gave interview questions and surveys in a small group so the students didn't feel singled out in any negative way. Recorded interviews were transcribed into a typed document and student artifacts were also used.

### **Trustworthiness**

This research study is reliable because there are multiple access points for data collection (Clark, Creswell 2012). Interviews, audio recordings, notes during instruction and surveys are all used to explore the literacy lives of these elementary readers and help answer my research questions. Furthermore, this study was approved by the Informational Review

Board (IRB) at the College at Brockport, a committee that thoroughly goes through research details to ensure credibility and confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Procedures**

I used a coding process to analyze my multiple sources of data. Codes are defined as “...labels that the researcher uses to describe the meaning of a segment of text or image in relation to the study’s central phenomenon”, codes help develop connections and emerging themes in research (Clark, Creswell 2010 p. 256) Open coding was the method I used to code and sort my data. This process of data analysis involves being open to the ideas that occur in the data, helping me examine all data to create my findings (Clark, Creswell 2010). Open coding was crucial to evaluating my multiple modes of data collection to find commonalities and disparities. This also helped me to keep an open mind and distance any biases during the research process.

I proceeded to open code, using my three data collection points (interview, survey, anecdotal notes). First, I took the interviews and transcribed them verbatim to get authentic responses. Next, I put the questions and student responses into a Microsoft Word table so I could compare their answers. I also put responses into a Venn diagram to compare and contrast responses, which helped me develop commonalities and differences within the data. I looked through my pages of field notes, books read by both participant, informal questions from class participation, McKenna and Kear Reading survey and compared to the interview response to find any common themes and connections that exist (Appendix B).

The reason for analyzing this data was to explore the literacy lives of male students who are reading at grade level, gathering information about what fuels their engagement and literacy

success. This analysis helped me explore my research questions of finding out what genres elementary male students enjoy reading, their attitude and perception towards “good” readers and various reading preferences.

Looking at the interviews, McKenna and Kear Survey (1994), field notes book choices, and all methods data collection, themes developed within the data collected. These themes helped me better understand the literacy life and strengths of these two successful readers. Reading choice was one topic that resonated with Brett and Landon; both craved freedom to choose books that reflected personal interest. Humor was a powerful genre for both kids, grabbing books with humorous and fantasy topics. Honing in on their confidence toward literacy, Brett and Landon had exhibited examples of growth mindset and flexibility toward reading. I also discovered that the boys would be friends with certain story characters, telling me they enjoy books where they can identify with characters.

### Research Findings

#### **Finding 1: Humor plays a factor in reading engagement.**

Elements of comedy and visual humor were popular and engaging for these successful readers. The data indicates that that these students prefer comedy fiction compared to nonfiction. Landon especially was drawn to chapter books with comical visuals such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Timmy Failure*. In one activity conducted on 2/15/16, Landon was required to write the title of his favorite book and why he liked it. He wrote *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. “It is funny!” Landon explained. During a library book exchange, Landon picked a book called *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck*. Adding to my field notes, I asked him a few questions about what motivated him to choose a specific book.

Interview Question	Landon
Why did you pick that book over all the other	I picked this book because it was funny.

ones?	There's always funny punches and funny words in the book. Greg is crazy. He is clumsy and gets in trouble.
Should I read this book?	Yes. It will make you laugh. You need to read it.

*Table 1: Interviewing Landon*

Knowing that both students picked many different book titles, I recorded their choices made during silent reading time, ELA centers and library books exchange. The symbol (L) represents one of Landon's choices, while (B) refers to one of Brett's choices. I proceeded to organize the book titles into fiction and not fiction genres. I highlighted books that fell into the category of humor. When examining their choices, I observed significant amount of titles fall in the fiction humor category and highlighted them. Out of the seventeen books recorded, 65% of them contained elements of comedy and fantasy. It seemed like this genre was the most engaging for independent reading choices.

Fiction	Nonfiction
Diary of a Wimpy Kid (L)	John Cena (B)
Dragons Love Tacos (L)	The Chicago Bears (B)
50 Below Zero (B)	Saint Patrick's Day (B)
Dinosaur Pizza (L)	The Human Brain (L)
Timmy Failure (L)	Minecraft Manual (L)
The GingerBread Man (B)	
Knuffle Bunny (L)	
Frog and Toad are Friends (L)	
Don't Eat the Teacher (B)	
Ten Fat Turkeys (B)	
Piggy and Elephant (B)	
Bunnicula (L)	

*Table 2: Landon and Brett's Book Selection*



Most of Landon's choices had funny graphics and plot. I could tell he was engaged with this genre because he would frequently request to choose a comedy choice from his backpack rather than choose a book from the classroom library. I observed at the book fair Landon preordered the next *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* because he was waiting impatiently to read it. Although he was not as enthused as Landon toward humor stories, Brett also showed obvious engagement toward this genre. When prompted to choose a story on 2/15, Brett chose *Ten Fat Turkeys*, a song-like story about ten turkeys that got into trouble. During Guided Reading Group on 2/8/16, Brett requested that he read to the group aloud the book *50 Below Zero*, a silly story about a dad who sleepwalks outside, filled with sound effects and noises. One whole group session we were brainstorming favorite book characters on 2/29 and Brett participated, saying "Captain Underpants". This choice not only contains elements of humor, but speech bubbles and graphics on each page. This coincides with a study of elementary readers using graphic novels. Research shows that graphic novels help to create meaningful reading engagements and interest for male readers (Laycock, 2007; Bunn, 2012). Providing the opportunity for Brett to read these funny, yet visual stories creates worthwhile interactions with texts.

### **Finding 2: Growth Mindset is used by successful readers.**

Growth mindset, or seeing challenges as a means to succeed, supports the literacy advancement of engaged readers. People who adopt a fixed mindset falter when challenged, for "... when they're not feeling smart or talented, they lose interest" (Dweck, 2006). Examining the reading attitude interview and anecdotal notes, I noticed that Brett and Landon did not seem to have a fixed mindset about reading. Two of my interview questions were meant to have the students open up about approaching reading challenges.

Interview Question	Landon	Brett
<b>2. If you knew someone</b>	I would say do you know the	Um, helping them with

<b>struggling to read, how would you help them?</b>	word? I would tell them sound it out and if they didn't get it still I would tell them the word.	words.
<b>3. What do you think is the hardest part about reading is?</b>	When I read <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> or <i>Timmy Failure</i> , I see words that I don't know, I just say a word and if it doesn't sound correct I try to resay it. Then if that doesn't work I ask my dad. And if my dad doesn't know I just use the word I started with.	The tricky words. I stretch it out or ask a friend.

Table 3: Growth Mindset Questions and Responses.

Neither of these students answered “giving up” as an option. Both showed they have ability and perseverance to work through a reading problem instead of avoiding it. I observed that both students for question #2, failed to mention asking a teacher as an option to help a struggling reader. This tells me they would choose to independently try helping a reading challenge instead of asking an adult, Landon especially exhibits growth mindset when answering question #3, trying multiple strategies after failure instead of choosing discouragement.

Linking with growth mindset, strong instances of positive reading behavior and attitude present themselves throughout the interview. One interview question was intended to see how each student would react to a friend who may not be engaged as reading.

Interview Question	Landon	Brett
<b>6. Suppose your friend came up to you and said, “I hate to read”. What would you say?</b>	I love to read, so don't tell me that. That's clearly what I would say.	You should read, it makes you smarter.

Table 4: Reading Attitude Responses.

Both students had answers that showed growth mindset and positive reading engagement. Brett says that his friend shouldn't hate to read because "...it makes you smarter". Landon exhibits confidence in his identity as a reader as he answers this question. Instead of caving to the pressure of friends who may not be engaged readers, these students promote strong literacy lives.

The presence of growth mindset also shows itself within my anecdotal notes and observations. During guided reading, the students requested to read chapter books in small books because they didn't want to read the "easy" books anymore. Embracing challenge to improve instead of staying with reading that is comfortable reflects a growth mindset. Growth mindset research supports that the brain is like a muscle; it needs to be stressed and challenged to promote growth (Dweck, 2006). Continuing with the interview, both first graders were asked this question:

Miss. Muszak	Landon	Brett
<b>7. Who is a good reader you know? What makes them a good reader?</b>	Me. Because I read every single day.	You. Because you know a lot of words. You make noises when you read; your voice can go slow.

*Table 5: Defining a "good" reader.*

When I looked at Brett's answer, I observed that he exhibits a growth mindset. He identifies a good reader and the qualities they possess. He can use this information to help himself improve as a reader. Landon also shows a growth mindset because he mentions the work he puts into reading rather than just proclaiming "I am just good at it". Landon reads every day, both in school and at home. His effort toward reading is the source of his improvement.

### Finding 3: Successful Readers Enjoy Choice

Looking at the reading preference survey based on the Burke version, I observed that both Landon and Brett had reading preferences that compared and contrasted to one another (Burke, 2005). They both enjoy many types of reading materials and genres based on their interests. Brett enjoys books that connect directly his interests. He is passionate about football outside of school and is frequently seen paging through a football book during independent reading. Looking at classroom observations and anecdotal notes, Brett enjoys superheroes and reading stories about them.

Questions	Landon	Brett
<b>5. What is your favorite genre?</b>	Well um, I know <i>Timmy Failure</i> is fiction but I know <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> is a little fiction and nonfiction so I like both.	A real book. About football. Football pictures, from the 90s.
<b>6. Would you rather read a chapter book or a comic book? Why?</b>	Oh that's a hard one. Um. I think I'm going to go with a chapter book. Wait, I don't know. A chapter book is cooler. It has a bunch of chapters so it would take longer.	A comic book because it has characters that I like.

Table 7: Reading Preferences

Looking at my classroom observations and notes, Landon is very vocal about requesting freedom to choose books. Many a time during independent reading , specifically on 2/24/15 and 3/4/15 he would ask, “Can I go into my backpack and grab the book I’m reading?” rather than choose a story from the classroom library. For home reading, he sometimes chose to read electronically rather than opening a book.

As I observed Landon and Brett during literacy block, I noticed that both boys enjoyed choosing books that appealed to their interests. In 3 of the 5 classroom visits, Landon would ask to grab an independent reading book rather than take one from the classroom library. Brett would gravitate toward books about football and WWE because he enjoys those activities outside of school. Landon also read a manual about how to make new scenery in a videogame, which he is highly motivated to play and create new worlds after school. The students like different types of books, fiction and nonfiction. However, their choices connect to their interests and extracurricular activities.

Not only enjoying choice of paper books, both students enjoyed digital text and eBooks. Landon claimed to enjoy reading on his Kindle, and participates in the computer resources that accompany the school literacy program, *Wonders*. Brett also breaks away from traditional paper chapter books and picture books. He enjoys WWE and football manuals and magazines, along with reading the powers and information on his collection of football and Pokémon cards. Jon Scieszka, children's author of *The Stinky Cheese Man* and creator of an elementary male literacy program, explains that boys need different mediums of text, shorter chapters and humor to create positive reading engagement (Scieszka, 2002). On the same token, if students are given the opportunity to choose reading materials based on their interest, they are more likely lead active literacy lives (Senn, 2012; Brozo, 2007). Both Brett and Landon seem to enjoy stories that relate to their interests and having appealing visuals.

### **Discussion**

Looking at the themes that have emerged in my data collection and analyses, I drew several conclusions for elementary male readers. These conclusions are supported by previous research and theoretical framework surrounding the topic of boys' reading achievement.

### **Promoting Books with Visuals and Humor Increases Reading Motivation**

It was evident that both Brett and Landon were drawn to reading books with comedic plots and characters with a sense of humor. These books are often dismissed as “not scholarly” or too simple to promote active reading (Sullivan, 2004). However, more and more chapter books with pictures offer complex plots and captivating characters that recruit boy readers (Bunn, 2012). Research also indicated that boys are drawn to books with visuals, whether it be photographs or cartoons that convey the plot (Senn, 2012 ; Blair & Sandford 2004). The first grade successful readers in my study gravitated towards humor stories. Looking back at Brett and Landon’s book choices, many had accompanying cartoons, speech bubbles and talking animal characters.

### **Successful Readers Need Freedom to Choose Books**

“It is crucial that the teacher gathers information about his or her pupils’ interests. With interesting reading material it is possible to encourage even the most reluctant reader to read” (Merisuo-Storm, 2006 p.18). In a of 24 adolescent boys’ literacy lives, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that giving an opportunity to choose books that appeal to outside of school interests increases reading motivation. Providing male students many options to experience interesting text will help develop a positive attitude toward reading.

The two participants in this study preferred their own reading materials rather than being ordered what to read. Landon enjoys humor, therefore choosing *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and other titles with the element of comedy. An avid player of the game Minecraft, Landon is interested in reading game manuals to help him improve his building skills outside of school. Brett loves playing and watching sports with his dad, explaining his favorite book about the Chicago Bears is their favorite team. Looking at Brett’s backpack of WWE wrestlers, it is not surprising that

Brett chose a book about John Cena to read at independent reading. Successful readers are driven by topics that interest them.

### **Growth Mindset Empowers Successful Readers**

Carol Dweck (2006) explains that people who embrace a growth mindset "...just don't seek challenge, they thrive on it. The bigger the challenge, the more they stretch" (p.6) Growth mindset creates readers who show stamina and perseverance (Dweck, 2006). It also helps students understand that when reading a book that is too easy; their reading brain stays the same instead of getting stronger.

Brett and Landon showed many instances of growth mindset, identifying their strengths yet striving for more challenges. Growth mindset is seen when these students are asked about good readers and what good readers do to be successful. Landon recognized that he is a good reader because he reads "...all the time!" Both students requested more difficult chapter books. Both students also identified strategies to use in challenging reading situations instead of giving up. Successful readers such as these two student foster a growth mindset, always welcoming challenges instead of conceding to difficulties.

### **Implications**

After completing this research regarding the literacy lives of successful first grade male readers, I can also share my research with literacy coaches and teachers to help instruction. Gaining the perspective of the strategies and mindset of successful readers will not only help teachers assist disengaged male readers, but also those highly motivated to read. It should also be noted that my study has limitations, and further questions emerge for literacy teachers that were not answered in the study.

### **Include Humor Books in Classroom Libraries**

I will not dismiss books that promote humor, graphics or speech bubbles as not academically worthy to sustain literacy lives. Instead, I will embrace them as ways to captivate both reluctant and successful readers the students in my study were very straightforward in choosing books with these attributes of comedy and visual drawings. My classroom library will validate the students who enjoy Captain Underpants and other graphic novels that call to the literacy lives of these male readers. Including text mediums that causes students to laugh and read simultaneously helps them develop positive interaction with reading.

### **Allowing Freedom of Choice**

I will take the time to listen to my students' interests, using surveys and informal interviews to create individualized book boxes with choices they find meaningful. Listening to what elementary male readers find interesting outside of school can help increase active reading and overall reading engagement. The students in my study were very vocal in what they enjoyed and disliked to read. Understanding that a traditional book with chapters and words may not captivate all readers, I will implement ways to promote literacy with magazines, manuals, comics and other formats to help students develop consistent reading behaviors.

### **Encouraging a Growth Mindset**

Lastly, I will inform students how powerful a growth mindset can be not only for literacy activities, but for all school pursuits. We will practice being proactive during challenges, showing enthusiasm when reading difficult text instead of being reluctant to struggle. Challenges will not carry the have negative stigma of frustration, instead they will be taught as a path for growth and change. Landon and Brett showed many occasions of growth mindset, which attributed to their success in first grade reading. All of these strategies will help my elementary male readers and all students succeed in reading engagement and motivation.



**Limitations**

Due to the fact there are only two research participants, I am not able to draw conclusions of the reading preferences and habits that encompasses all successful elementary male readers. Since I am not a full time teacher, the research was conducted solely at a suburban school with just two students for five weeks. However, my study research is one portal in understanding first grade male students who show reading engagement. More research is needed to understand the preferences and attitudes of successful elementary male readers.

**Questions for Further Research**

1. How do parents impact the literacy life of elementary male readers?
2. How do stereotypes impact book choice of successful elementary male readers?
3. Do graphic novels positively impact reading achievement for boys?

**Closing**

Exploring the literacy lives of these first grade readers offers the perspective of a group that defies a dominant statistic in educational research; boys are underachieving and disconnected readers. Growth mindset played a pivotal role in promoting reading achievement and using strategies to embrace challenges. This research project not only helped me give a voice to boys who are active and engaged readers, it provided me with insight to preferences to help recruit averse readers into the “reading club”.

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## Appendix A- Interview

Interview Question	Landon	Brett
<b>1. How do you feel about reading? Why do you feel that way?</b>	I like reading because a lot of stuff is really good.	It makes me feel special. Um, because it's fun reading.
<b>2. If you knew someone struggling to read, how would you help them?</b>	Um I would say "do you know the word?" I would tell them sound it out and if they didn't get it still I would tell them the word"	Um, helping them with words.
<b>3. What do you think is the hardest part about reading is?</b>	When I read Diary of a Wimpy Kid or Timmy Failure, I see words that I don't know, I just say a word and if it doesn't sound correct I try to resay it. Then if that doesn't work I ask my Dad. And if my dad doesn't know I just use the word I started with.	The tricky words. I stretch it out or ask a friend.
<b>4. What is your favorite genre?</b>	Well um, I know Timmy Failure is fiction but I know Diary of a Wimpy kid is a little fiction and nonfiction so I like both.	A real book. About football. Football pictures, from the 90s.
<b>5. Would you rather read a chapter book or a comic book? Why?</b>	Oh that's a hard one. Um. I think I'm going to go with a chapter book. Wait, I don't know. A chapter book is cooler. It has a bunch of chapters so it would take longer.	A comic book because it has characters that I like.
<b>6. Suppose your friend came up to you and said "I hate to read". What would you say?</b>	I love to read, so don't tell me that. That's clearly what I would say.	You should read, it makes you smarter.
<b>7. Who is a good reader you know? What makes them a good reader?</b>	Me. Because I read every single day.	You. Because you know a lot of words. You make noises when you read, your voice

















		can go slow.
<b>8. Where do you enjoy reading?</b>	The couch or a chair.	The carpet

## Appendix B- Reading Attitude Survey

**Elementary Reading Attitude Survey**

















School \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

















1.	How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?			
				
2.	How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?			
				
3.	How do you feel about reading for fun at home?			
				
4.	How do you feel about getting a book for a present?			
				















Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

5.	How do you feel about spending free time reading a book?			
				
6.	How do you feel about starting a new book?			
				
7.	How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?			
				
8.	How do you feel about reading instead of playing?			
				

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

9.	How do you feel about going to a bookstore?			
				
10.	How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?			
				
11.	How do you feel when a teacher asks you questions about what you read?			
				
12.	How do you feel about reading workbook pages and worksheets?			
				

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

13.	How do you feel about reading in school?			
				
14.	How do you feel about reading your school books?			
				
15.	How do you feel about learning from a book?			
				
16.	How do you feel when it's time for reading in class?			
	